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# Selection and Competition in Creole Formation: A Case Study

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## Selection and Competition in Creole Formation: A Case Study

# Selection and Competition in Creole Formation: A Case Study\*

Marlyse Baptista

## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Extrapolating from the concept of linguistic selection and competition (Mufwene 2001), this paper explores how given a biological model of language evolution, some linguistic features compete and are ultimately selected to participate to the formation of a new language, a creole. The ultimate question is how do such features get selected?

The goal of this paper is two-fold: the first objective is to explore a set of grammatical morphemes, lexemes, and structures in the nominal and verbal domain of Cape Verdean Creole (henceforth, CVC) that are likely to have been reanalyzed and restructured following patterns of the contributing languages, including Portuguese and African languages such as Wolof. The second related goal is to explore the role of congruence in language contact, that is, homophonous grammatical morphemes that may be found in both Wolof/other African languages and Portuguese. We will consider whether these morphemes follow a distributional or semantic pattern reminiscent of the contributing African languages, of Portuguese or is entirely innovative, hence, intrinsic to the grammatical properties of CVC.

## 2 The Outcomes of Congruence between Substratal Languages and Portuguese

### 2.1 Congruence: A Basic Definition

In mathematics, congruence refers to the relationship between two geometric figures that have the same size and shape. This concept finds its analogy in linguistics when referring to two (or more) items that are homophonous or

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\*This paper is a condensed, shorter version of a paper entitled “*When substrates meet superstrate: The case of Cape Verdean Creole*” (Baptista 2006) in which I also consider reduplication and copular predicates.

<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to Jürgen Lang, John Holm, Sarah Thomason, Jeff Heath, Acrisio Pires and John Rickford for valuable feedback on this paper. Many thanks to Jürgen Lang in particular for very detailed comments on both drafts. All errors remain, naturally, my own.

phonologically similar in the languages coming into contact. The implicit hypothesis is that language learners in a contact setting actively use homophony as a building block in the formation of the new emerging language.<sup>2</sup> We must say, right away, that at this point in time, several questions will remain unanswered in this paper but will be the topic of future research. They are as follows: 1) Why do some morphemes that bear some degree of resemblance to each other, and present in both the African and the European languages survive in the newly emerged creole while others do not? Could token frequency, saliency, regularity, and semantic transparency truly be viewed as determining factors, as discussed in Siegel (2001:191)? 2) How do the morphemes common to both source languages get selected? 3) In the case of polysyllabic grammatical words, why does a given syllable survive over another (syllabic stress will be shown not to be a reliable predictor)?

In this particular paper, I examine a specific set of grammatical morphemes including the anteriority morpheme *-ba*, as well as the negative morpheme *ka* and the conditional *ál*. I will argue that, most likely, they emerged and survived in the newly formed language because they have a double etymology. In other words, they are present in Cape Verdean Creole today because they existed in both the dialect of Portuguese spoken at the time or to this day and in the contributing African languages like Wolof.

### 3 The African Element

The creole spoken in the Cape Verde islands (locally referred to as *Kriolu*) is historically and linguistically intimately related to the creole spoken in Guinea-Bissau. For this reason, one cannot explore the history of Cape Verde and its language without exploring that of the western coast of Africa, particularly that of Guinea.

The coast of Gambia, Casamance, and Guinea-Bissau is believed to have been discovered in 1446 during two consecutive expeditions. This early

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<sup>2</sup>It should be emphasized that congruence in this paper is not to be equated with relexification. In her study of relexification, Lefebvre (1993, 1998, 2004) postulates that new labels are assigned to the lexical entries of a given lexicon. The newly formed lexical entries are endowed with the syntactic and semantic properties of the original entries with labels originating from another language. To make this concrete, in the case of Haitian creole for instance, Lefebvre (1998) proposes that its structures result mainly from the relexification of Fongbe structures with French-derived lexical forms. In this paper, the objective is not to demonstrate a systematic phenomenon but rather to illustrate how double-etymology plays a role in language-building. Furthermore, while Lefebvre refers to Fongbe consistently, we deal in this paper with a wider variety of African languages.

date has led some linguists to postulate that a *proto-Kriolu* could have emerged by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Kihm 1994).

Black slaves were captured and brought back to Portugal in the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Carreira 1983). Several thousand slaves would have lived in Lisbon at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century where they mixed with the white population. This fact is corroborated in the Portuguese literature by playwrights such as Gil Vicente who imitated a *lingua dos pretos* (black speech) in some of his plays. Careful examination of this speech, although caricaturized, reveals phonological and morphosyntactic features that one finds in some of the contemporary Portuguese-based creoles (cf. Teyssier 1959).

As for the exact nature of the language spoken by the black slaves in Portugal, two hypotheses have been proposed: according to the first one, slaves spoke a *reconnaissance language* deliberately taught to the Blacks by the Portuguese so that they could communicate with each other. This would have allowed the Portuguese to use the slaves as interpreters during the expeditions on the African continent. The second hypothesis simply argues that the slaves learned Portuguese as a second language. Kihm (1994) proposes that traveling back and forth between Portugal and West Africa could have given rise to a Portuguese pidgin that served as the foundation for the proto-creole that developed in Senegambia and Cape Verde.

This leads us to the question of finding out where CVC originated. This is a controversial issue and three hypotheses have been proposed so far: some scholars believe that CVC emerged in Portugal (Naro 1978), others in Guinea, and a third group in Cape Verde (Kihm 1994, Peck 1988, Lang 1999:185).

The *lançados* (also called tangomãos), settlers of Portuguese origin, are said to have formed a dynamic trading force (exchanging goods and slaves) between the Portuguese and the local populations. Settling on the African mainland, they married local women and are believed to have actively contributed to the formation of Cape Verdean Creole. Boulègue (1987:117) reports that indirect reference to them was made in a royal letter dating back to 1500, which leads to the conclusion that *lançados* appeared in the first decades of Portuguese settlement. Cape Verdeans themselves played an active role in the Atlantic economy between the archipelago and the neighboring African coast (Boulègue 1987:142) and seem to have formed a distinct economical force from the *lançados*. From these facts, one can easily imagine a scenario where the interaction between the Cape-Verdean traders and the *lançados* all contributed to the formation of two distinct but related creoles, one with its roots on the African mainland, and the other on the archipelago.

The languages which have greatly contributed to the genesis and formation of *Kriolu* are varied. Besides Portuguese, which contributed to its lexicon, the African element is mostly represented by the Niger-Kordofanian languages: the West-Atlantic languages (Wolof, Fula, Serer, Balanta, Manjaku, Mankan, Dyola, and Bola among others) and the Mande languages (Malinke and Bambara<sup>3</sup> to mention just a few) (Brásio 1962). Lang (1999:185) isolates three languages in particular as having played a particularly important role: Wolof, Temne, and Mandinga (including Bambara and Dyola).

In the next section, a set of grammatical morphemes with possible double-etymology that can be traced back to both the contributing African languages and to Portuguese is examined.

## 4 Grammatical Morphemes

### 4.1 The Anteriority Morpheme *-ba*

Although anterior markers tend to precede the verb in Atlantic Creoles, Cape Verdean Creole is an exception, as it has a postverbal anterior marker *-ba* which is suffixed to main verbs (and to the auxiliary *sta*). When it suffixes to a stative verb, the utterance yields a simple past tense reading, as illustrated in (1a); whereas when it suffixes to a nonstative verb, the interpretation is past-before-past, as in (1b).

- (1) a. *Ami kunpadri, N ka konxe**ba**.* (RC) (simple past)  
       me godfather I NEG knew  
       ‘As for me, I did not know my child’s godfather.’  
       b. *Dj’e fudjib**a** dja.* (RS) (past before past)  
       COMP. he fled already  
       ‘He had already fled.’

The etymological origins and use of *-ba* have divided Creolists into three different camps. Almada (1961:116) suggested that the marker *-ba* is derived from the Portuguese inflection *-va*, which is used to express the imperfect of first conjugation verbs, as shown in (2).

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<sup>3</sup>Jürgen Lang makes the correct observation that Bambara (per se) did not yet exist as such during the creolization period. Bambara emerged in the XVIII century from a mixture between several Mande dialects. It is, however, somewhat necessary to refer to Bambara, given that it is the best described Mande language.

- (2) *Eu falava sempre com os meus pais.* (Portuguese)  
 I talk+va always with Det. my parents  
 'I always talked to my parents.'

On the other hand, Bickerton (1981:81) assumed that *-ba* is derived from the completive marker *kaba*, present in a number of creoles, and would be itself derived from Portuguese *acabar* 'to finish'. Finally, there are those supporting a Guinean origin for *-ba*. Following Rougé (1986:24),<sup>4</sup> Peck (1988:331) argued that *-ba* may originate from African languages such as Manjak, Mankan, Dyola, Mandinka, and Bambara. Indeed, these languages mark the perfect aspect with morphemes bearing some morphophonological resemblance to *-ba*: *-ba* in Manjak and Mankan, *ban* in Dyola, and *ka ban* in Mandinka. Observe the example from Bambara in (3):

- (3) *A ye na tobi ka ban.* (Bambara)  
 he Past sauce cook and finish  
 'He has already cooked the sauce.'  
 (Holm 1986:263 in Peck 1988:333)

Peck (1988:332) observed that from a semantic point of view, *-ba* is closer to the African forms that mark completion of the event than it is to the Portuguese *-va*, which expresses imperfect. Besides the semantic parallel, there is also a syntactic similarity in the distribution of substrate morphemes like *kaban* and *ba* in Guinea-Bissau Creole, as *ba* occurs in that particular creole as a free morpheme (4), contrary to CVC where it is bound.

- (4) *Onti ba n oja'l.* (Guinea-Bissau Creole)  
 yesterday ANT I saw him  
 'Yesterday, I saw him.'

Constructions like that in (4) led Peck to suggest that both Portuguese and African substrata played a role in the development of *ba* in Guinea-Bissau Creole and most likely in CVC.

Regarding the temporal interpretations of *-ba*, Suzuki (1994:16) noted that the notion of anterior tense conveyed by the suffixation of *-ba* is similar to that of the relative past tense in Comrie (1976). Comrie defined a relative

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<sup>4</sup>Rougé (1999:9) argues more precisely that *-ba* emerged from a cross between the imperfect inflection of Portuguese verbs ending in *-ar* (ex: *falar* > *falava*) and the verb *-ba*, meaning 'to end', which, in some African languages, is post-posed to the verb and express an accomplished event.

tense as one “where the reference point for location of a situation is some point in time given by the context, not necessarily the present moment” (Comrie 1976:56). Under this notion, the relative past tense is interpreted as referring to some point in time before a reference point possibly provided by the context.

#### 4.2 The Negative Morpheme *ka*

This section examines in detail sentential negation in Cape Verdean Creole including the position of the negator *ka* with regard to main verbs and TMA markers.

When expressing sentential negation, Cape Verdean *ka* precedes not only the main verb, as shown in (5), but also the sequence of TMA markers. In other words, *ka* must be preverbal<sup>5</sup> and never allows markers such as *ta*, as in (6), or combinations such as *sta ta*, as in (7) to precede it.

- (5) a. *Anos nu ka fronta-l.* (RS)  
 Non-CL. CL. NEG challenge+him  
 ‘We did not challenge him.’  
 b. \**Anos nu fronta-l ka.*  
 Non-CL. CL. challenge+him NEG
- (6) a. *Rabeladu ka ta briga.* (RS)  
 Rabeladu NEG ASP fight  
 ‘The Rabeladu do not fight.’  
 b. \**Rabeladu ta ka briga.*  
 Rabeladu ASP NEG fight
- (7) a. *Asagua ka sa ta daba.* (RS)  
 rainy period NEG TMA TMA gave  
 ‘The rainy period was not yielding much.’  
 b. \**Asagua sa ta ka daba.* (RS)  
 rainy period TMA TMA NEG gave

*Ka* may negate VPs, as shown in (5) through (7) but can also negate other types of constituents such as NPs (8) and PPs (9).

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<sup>5</sup>As will be discussed in section 4, the only exception to this rule is the copula-like morpheme *e* which is the only Cape Verdean verb, (let us call it a light verb) found in a pre-Neg position.



- (8) *E ka maniok ki João kunpra na merkadu.*  
 FOC. NEG manioc that João buy in market  
 ‘It is not manioc that João bought at the market.’

- (9) *E ka na merkadu ki João kunpra maniok.*  
 FOC. NEG in market that João bought manioc  
 ‘It is not at the market that João bought the manioc.’

Cape Verdean *ka* can occur clause-internally between subject and predicate, as illustrated in (10):

- (10) *E fla-nu pa du<sup>6</sup> ka toma.* (RS)  
 CL. told+us for we NEG take  
 ‘He told us not to take it.’

Negation can occur in two different places, negating either the embedded predicate (as in (10)) or the matrix predicate, as illustrated in (11):

- (11) *E ka fla-nu pa du toma.*  
 CL. NEG told+us for we take  
 ‘He did not tell us to take it.’

Furthermore, *ka* may negate the matrix predicate and the embedded one, as shown in (12):

- (12) *E ka fla-nu pa du ka toma.*  
 CL. NEG told+us for we NEG take  
 ‘He did not tell us not to take it.’

The generalization that can be derived from these data is that *ka* is always preverbal with both matrix and subordinate predicates and always precedes TMA markers whether they occur in isolation or in combination.

The most logical Portuguese origin for *ka* is *nunca* and this would make sense if one takes into account the fact that as reported in Dalgado (1900) quoted in Kihm (1994), it is used as a predicate negation in some of the Asian Portuguese-based Creoles and it also appears as such in Teyssier’s 1959 rendition of 16<sup>th</sup> century *Lingua de Preto*. The only potential problem with this theory, as highlighted in Santos (1979:82), is that the unstressed

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<sup>6</sup>In some varieties, the first person plural pronoun *nu* ‘we’, is rendered by *du*, as shown in (10), (11) and (12).

syllable was kept rather than the stressed one. Santos argues that such evolution (where the unstressed syllable is maintained at the expense of the stressed one) is contrary to any phonetic evolution characterizing the passage of lexemes from Portuguese into CVC. Santos finds a possible source of *ka* in the Mankang negative morpheme *nkö*.<sup>7</sup>

Teyssier (1990), however, provides compelling evidence that the popular Portuguese spoken around 1500 used *nunca* as a simple negator (not as an adverb meaning 'never'), and that this use was preserved in some Asian creoles to this day.<sup>8</sup> He also acknowledges that Mandinga has a number of negative aspectual markers ending in *-ka* or starting in *ka-* (Teyssier 1990:252). This leads Teyssier to conclude that *nunka* gave birth to *ka* in part due to its presence in the local languages, resulting in a blending between a Romance and African morpheme.

Kihm (1994:47) echoes Teyssier by noting that a number of the surrounding languages express negation with items involving *ka*. In Mandinka, negative tenses are expressed by the morphemes *buka* (simple imperfective indicative), *kana* (imperative subjunctive), and *kaka* (imperfective imperative). Manjaku has two negative morphemes: *dika* for the unaccomplished and *kats(a)* meaning 'no longer'. In Balanta one of the allomorphs of the negation is /*kě*/ (Wilson 1961). These morphemes can better be analyzed as negative auxiliaries rather than simple negations.

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<sup>7</sup>Santos argues that such etymology could be corroborated by the fact that the negative marker precedes the verb by giving examples such as (ii), but one should note that in Portuguese as well, the negator precedes the verb.

- (i)     *e*     *ka*     *kre* (CVC)  
          he     NEG   want  
          'he does not want to.'
- (ii)   *Aa*   *nkö*   *ten* (Mankang)  
          he     NEG   look  
          'He does not look.'

Santos is, however, cautious and warns against being too categorical when it comes to etymological research.

<sup>8</sup>I am much indebted to Nicolas Quint for bringing Teyssier's (1990) reference to my attention and for providing me with a copy of this very valuable source. Nicolas Quint also pointed out to me that he drew a parallel between the evolution of the negator in Sursilvan and Cape Verdean (*nunka* > *ka*) in Quint (2000:229–230). N. Quint acknowledges Rut Bernardi and Matthias Grünert as having been instrumental in helping him gather all the necessary bibliographical material on Sursilvan.

These data show that the presence of the morpheme *ka* in both Portuguese and African languages in a negator type of function very likely insured its preservation (with the same function) in the creole when it first emerged.

### 4.3 The Morpheme *ál*

To give another example, it could be argued that the Cape Verdean particle *ál* that typically expresses a wish or conveys a probability, as in (13) for instance

- (13) *ál txobe*  
'may it rain'

can possibly be traced back to the Portuguese expression *há de* 'must' (see Lang 2002:163), but also to Wolof *yal, yálla* which is an expression introducing a wish. As the Wolof were already islamized by the time the Portuguese arrived, this is indeed a highly plausible scenario.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper has investigated cases of congruence between Portuguese and African languages in the area of grammatical morphemes. I hope to have demonstrated that one can only accurately describe the properties of a given creole and gain a better understanding of their source/origin by taking into account the input from both the superstrate and substrate languages.

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